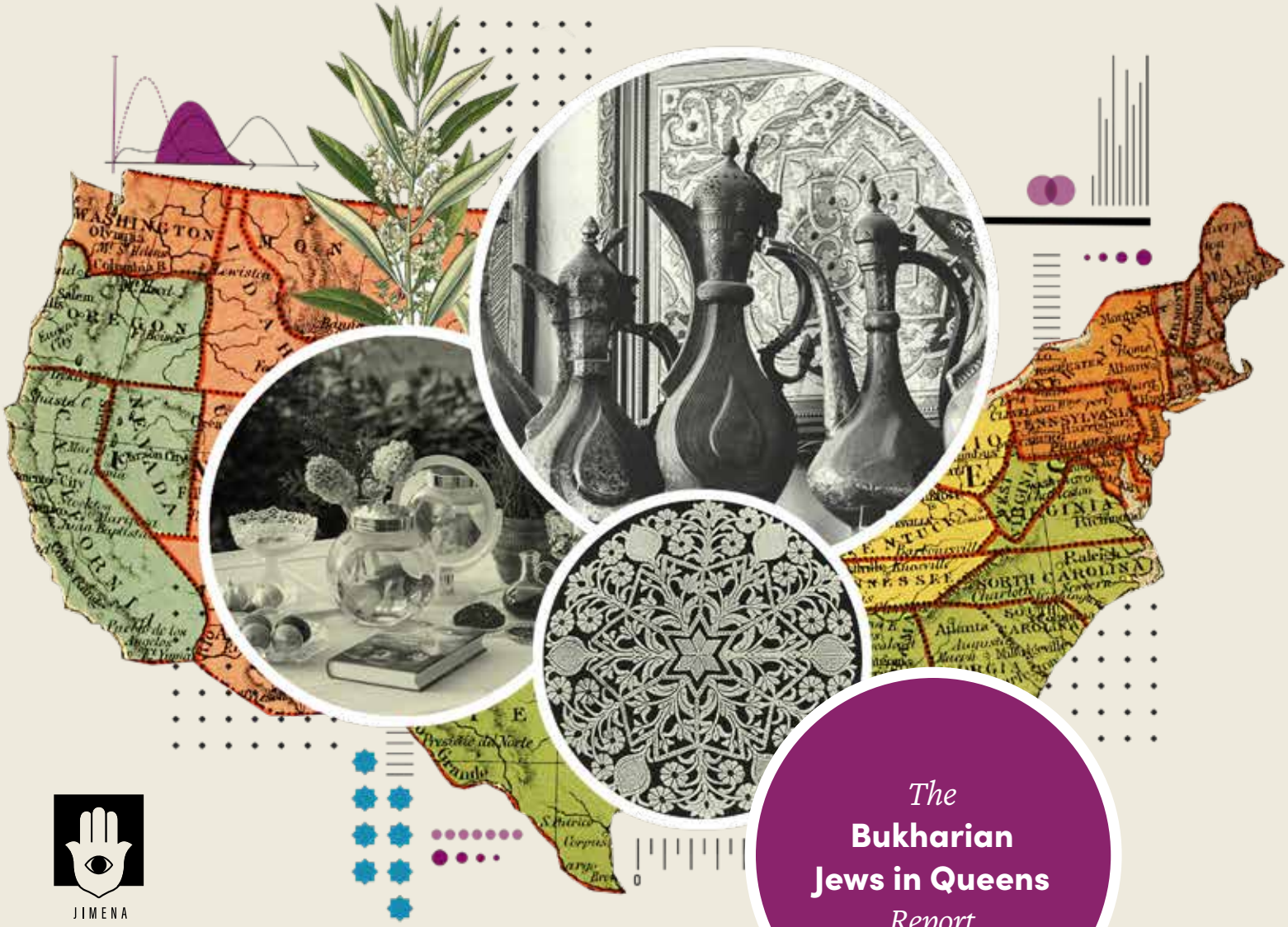
Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



The **Bukharian Jews in Queens** *Report*

JIMENA

Commissioned by
JIMENA: JEWS INDIGENOUS TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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NYU BRONFMAN

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THE

Bukharian Jews in Queens

REPORT

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About This Study

THIS REPORT IS ONE OF SEVERAL produced from a multi-year research project focused on understanding the identities, experiences, and communal life of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States. The study was conducted by an academic research team based at New York University, under the direction of Dr. Mijal Bitton, and was commissioned by JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. It was made possible with the generous support of a range of philanthropic and institutional partners committed to advancing Sephardic and Mizrahi inclusion in Jewish communal life.

The project was carried out by a strong team of interdisciplinary researchers and benefitted from the guidance of an international academic advisory committee. In addition to academic input, we actively engaged practitioners and community leaders—both as interview participants and as advisors—to ensure the research reflected lived realities and communal perspectives.

The study aims to support a more inclusive Jewish communal landscape—one that reflects the richness, diversity, and complexity of Sephardic life. It is designed as a comprehensive resource: offering new data, field-based insights, historical context, and practical guidance to help scholars, educators, and communal professionals better understand and engage Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the American context.

This work brings together two complementary forms of research:

- **Secondary analysis** of existing literature reviews, historical material, and quantitative data—including national and local Jewish population surveys—organized through our guiding questions and reinterpreted through a Sephardic and Mizrahi lens.
- **Original fieldwork,** including interviews, site visits, and ethnographic observations across four key Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration.

Although the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi have distinct origins and meanings, this study reflects how they are used—and contested—by participants. In line with community usage, we primarily use "Sephardic" as a broad social identity while noting when "Mizrahi" is relevant. Across the study, we prioritized self-identification and recognized the limitations of existing categories—religious, racial, and ethnic—in capturing these communities' realities.

The study was conducted during a time of shifting communal and political context for Jews in America—including the brutal October 7th attacks by Hamas in Israel, the subsequent rise in antisemitism across the US, and intensifying public debate around race, identity, and inclusion in American Jewish life.These broader dynamics shaped both the narratives we heard and the urgency of this work.

This project is offered as a first step, not a final word. It is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive, and we hope it serves as a foundation for future research. For further directions, see the "Recommendations" section of this report.

We invite you to explore the full report or delve into any of its focused sub-sections. Below is the full table of contents.

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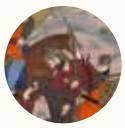

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SECTION 1.

Background

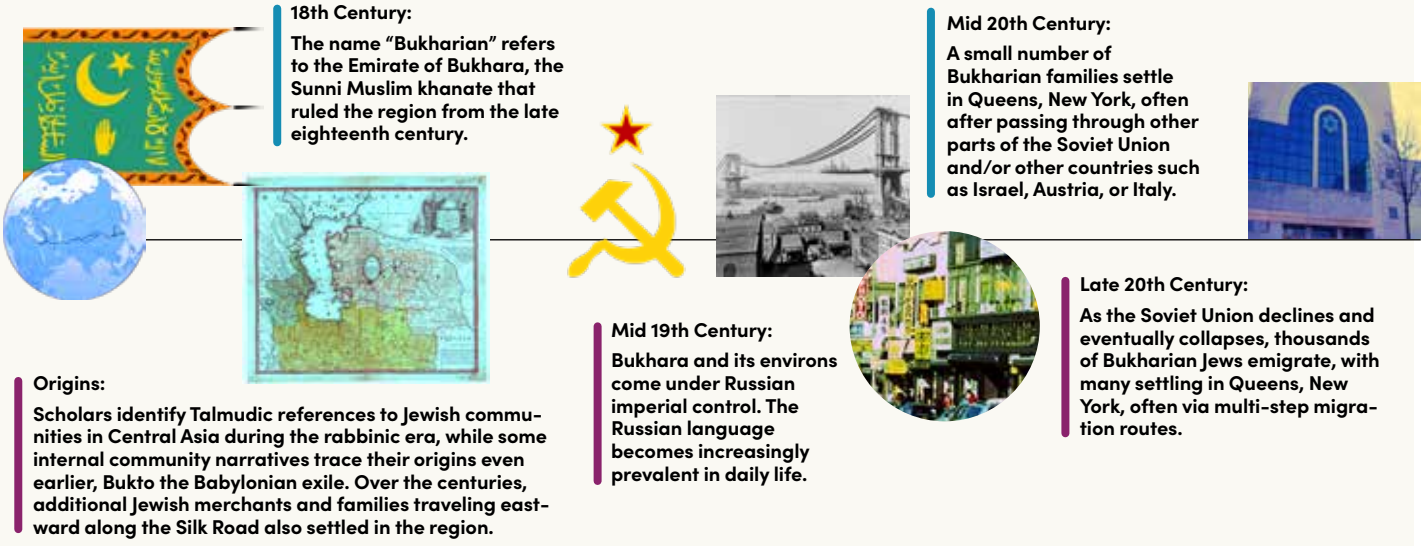
A Note on Terminology:
In general, Bukharian Jews self-identify as Bukharian, rather than using Sephardic or another pan-ethnic identity, emphasizing their unique history and customs. The community is nevertheless included in this study of Sephardic Jews because they exemplify a group that uses the term "Sephardic" to describe their legal, ritual, and liturgical practices. As one community member explained, even though Bukharian Jews do not originate from Spain, he felt comfortable using Sephardic because "we took the customs and the minhagim of the Shulhan Arukh."

A Note on Spelling:
As of the early 21st century, community members have used the spelling "Bukharian." Alternative, less frequently used spellings include "Bukharan" and "Bokharan."

IMMIGRATION

Archeological evidence dates the existence of Central Asian Jewish communities to at least 1,100 years ago, though many community members believe that Central Asian Jewish communities had existed long before the Roman Exile. Over several centuries, as robust trade routes flourished between the Mediterranean and the Far East along the Silk Road, Jewish merchants and their families continued to migrate eastward and settle the region. The term "Bukharian" originated in the sixteenth century in reference to the emirate of Bukhara, an area encompassing portions of what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where Jewish communities settled in cities such as Samarkand, Tashkent, Dushanbe, Andijan, and Bukhara (a city that shares its name with the broader region). Though influenced over time by both Persian and Sephardic Jews, by the eighteenth century the Bukharian Jews were largely isolated from other Jews in the Middle East and Asia as a result of political, economic, and religious upheaval in the region.

FROM BUKHARA TO QUEENS: Historical Highlights of the Queens Bukharian Community



The territory where Bukharians resided came under Russian control in the late nineteenth century, and the Russian language became increasingly prevalent in daily life, including among Bukharian Jews. When the USSR formed in the twentieth century, many Central Asian communities were not subject to the same religious restrictions found elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and the Bukharian community was able to retain its religious and ethnic identity throughout the Soviet regime.

Bukharians settled in the United States as early as the 1950s, although most came later. Community insiders describe immigration from the Soviet Union in two waves, a small one in the 1970s and a larger one from the late 1980s to early 1990s that coincided with the weakening and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Concerned with economic instability and antisemitism in emerging Central Asian nations, many Jews took the opportunity to leave once the borders of the former Soviet Union opened.

PLACES OF SETTLEMENT

The Bukharian families of the first immigration wave settled primarily in the neighborhoods of Forest Hills and Rego Park in Queens, New York. Immigrants who came to Queens after the fall of the Soviet Union joined the existing Bukharian community and began expanding outward to neighborhoods such as Kew Gardens, Kew Gardens Hills, Hillcrest, Jamaica Estates, Fresh Meadows, Briarwood, and Holliswood. As property values in Queens have continued to rise over the last decade or so, some Bukharians have opted to move to Long Island or outside of the New York Tri-State area altogether.

According to the UJA 2023 Community Study, an estimated 21,800 people—based on the upper range of their combined adult and child estimates—identify with Bukharian Jewish traditions or ancestry based on responses to the question, "Do you identify with any of the following ethnicities and traditions?"[1] This contrasts with estimates from Bukharian community leaders, who place the number closer to 75,000, within a global population of approximately 200,000. The true number likely falls somewhere in between, but pinpointing it remains a challenge.

Though beyond the focus of this demographic portrait, a sizeable Bukharian community lives in Brooklyn,

and smaller communities can be found in other regions of the United States, such as Phoenix and Atlanta.

LANGUAGES

Under Soviet rule, Russian was the primary language spoken among Bukharian Jews, and Russian is still spoken among many older members of the Bukharian community. Those who immigrated as children or who were born in the US often speak Russian with family, particularly with older relatives, or say they can understand Russian but have difficulty speaking, reading, or writing. Interviewees with young children sometimes send their toddlers to Russian-speaking daycare, but the language is not necessarily reinforced in the home.

Before immigrating, families from cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, and Dushanbe spoke the Bukharian language, a form of Judeo-Persian inflected with Russian and Tajik influences and written with Hebrew letters in Rashi script. According to some interviewees, the Bukharian language was stigmatized as parochial, particularly in Tashkent and other more Russified cultural centers. Bukharians who immigrated when young or who were born in the US rarely know or speak the Bukharian language, though they often express a cultural affinity to it.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Educational and professional aspirations within the Bukharian community tend to reflect two visions of success. The first, what one interviewee called the

50,000 –75,000

While official data is limited, Bukharian community leaders in New York estimate that approximately 50,000 to 75,000 Bukharian Jews live in the NYC metro area, primarily in Queens. That ranks it as one of the largest Bukharian communities worldwide, second only to Israel.

"risk-averse stream," sees long-term economic stability as the primary aim. Parents impress upon their children the value of education, and expect that they will earn at least a bachelor's degree, preferably in a field with real-world professional applications, such as computer science, engineering, and medicine; humanities and the social sciences are discouraged, unless they serve as stepping stones to professional paths such as law school.

The other, more "high-risk" vision of success is focused on fields such as real estate, jewelry, hairdressing, and a variety of other cash-based businesses. Interviewees suggest that men are more likely than woman to follow such career paths. Becoming a barber is a particularly popular career path for Bukharian men and is considered a way to earn a high salary in a relatively short amount of time. Manny, a 44-year-old businessman who immigrated to the United States in his teens, described his financial outlook as linked to concerns about antisemitism to:

> *"A lot of Bukharian men, we don't have a profession. Our profession is to procure…to bring money home. You don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow. You don't know if your house is gonna get burned because you're Jewish. You don't know if you're gonna get robbed because…they're looking at you because you're Jewish."*

Although no objective statistics of poverty rates in the community are available, rabbis and other leaders in the community report many families struggle with unemployment and/or near-poverty income levels. A significant number of households, many with single mothers, are on food assistance and regularly receive food packages from charitable organizations.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Most interviewees described religious observance along a continuum from "traditional" to "observant," rather than within a denominational framework. Nearly all Bukharian Jews observe holidays, celebrate Shabbat in some form with family, and refrain from eating pork and other explicitly nonkosher animals in their homes. Refraining from driving or the use of electronics on Shabbat, or not eating at non-kosher restaurants, is more varied.

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

The Bukharian community places a tremendous emphasis on the family as a unit. A typical household consists of a husband, wife, and multiple children, who tend to live with their parents until they get married in their early twenties and start families of their own. Most Bukharian undergraduates, especially young women, live at home and commute to college, though in recent years some have begun to live on college campuses. A growing portion of young Bukharians wait to marry until their mid to late twenties.

The community's divorce rate has risen dramatically in the last few decades. Interviewees attribute this change to a range of factors, mostly related to shifting ideas about relationships and marriage. Women who in the past may have been entirely reliant on their husbands for income now have greater access to higher education and the financial resources to leave unhappy marriages. A few interviewees also suggested that wives now expect marriage to be a partnership, and they are less likely to tolerate patriarchal attitudes of marriage originating in the cultural norms of Central Asia.

COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS

Religious institutions such as synagogues, schools, and ritual baths, and food-related establishments such as restaurants, supermarkets, and butchers, comprise the major communal institutions and organizations. Some interviewees mentioned local businesses, cultural institutions, or social services by name, but most spoke in overarching categories such as "synagogues" or "businesses."

SECTION 2.

Identities

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

Most interviewees identified first and foremost as Bukharian, and many were dismissive of using Sephardic or Mizrahi identifiers, explaining that these terms were not used in Bukharian communities prior to immigration. As one American-born interviewee remarked,

> *"If you had asked the prior generation, like my grandfather, for example, how he identified himself—Sephardic or Mizrahi—he would have said neither. He would have said we are Bukharian. This whole Sephardic thing…There was no such label."*

When pressed to choose, though, Bukharian Jews are more likely to lean toward Sephardic over Mizrahi for two main reasons. First, Sephardic is a more familiar term in the Jewish-American context, often used broadly as a counterpoint to Ashkenazi. Second, Sephardic refers to religious practice, particularly the liturgical and halakhic influences of Sephardic rabbis who visited the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For those whose religious observance is central to their identity, these Sephardic traditions form a key part of how they understand themselves as observant Jews. Some Bukharian interviewees acknowledged that Sephardic may not technically apply to them, given its association with Jews of Spanish origin, and they mentioned hearing Mizrahi as a potentially more accurate category.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

The Bukharian community is distinctive among subgroups in the broader Sephardic umbrella in that they identify not with a contemporary geographic country of origin, but rather as an ethno-religious group rooted in a nostalgic geographic region. The term "Bukhara" recalls the bygone Central Asian emirate in which Jewish communities were allowed to settle. According to the interviewees, inherent in the label "Bukharian" is the religious designation "Jewish." Surrounding neighbors who identified as Uzbek, Tajik, or Kazakh were all understood to be Muslim. A Jew from Uzbekistan, for instance, was never an Uzbeki Jew, which was considered a contradiction in terms; an Uzbek was Muslim and a Bukharian was Jewish. Although Muslims from the city of Bukhara might refer to themselves as Bukharan, the Bukharian Jewish community uses the term Bukharian to refer exclusively to Jews. The Soviet government reinforced this distinction by officially listing *Jewish* as a separate ethnic identity on internal documents and passports, further setting Bukharian Jews apart from their non-Jewish neighbors.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Interviewees expressed confusion over where they fit into the American frameworks of race and ethnicity. Most debated whether to identify as white or other.

> *"I've always had trouble identifying as what is it that I am," said Elizabeth, an immigrant in her 30s. "I pick white, but I feel white is more like…European white. It's not like I'm black, Native American, Hispanic…So I would always put white."*

Interviewees also expressed confusion about whether or not they are considered Asian according to American standards. Robert, who immigrated from Central Asia in his early teens, recalled the pushback he received from his American-born peers when he described himself as Asian:

"Basically what they're trying to say is if you don't look a certain way and if you're not from East Asia, you're not Asian. So that was really an interesting wake-up moment…These categories, they really frustrate me…and they frustrate many of us who are from West Asia and Central Asia…"

JEWS OF COLOR

With one exception, Bukharian interviewees did not use the term JOC to self-identify, and many were unfamiliar with the term until it was raised during the interview process. Most initially associated it with Jews who are black. Others found the term irrelevant, noting that Bukharian Jews do not present a uniform appearance and do not define themselves by skin color. As Pinchas, a 48-year-old immigrant, explained,

"In the Bukharian community, there are different skin colors of people. There are blonde people, there are white people, there are dark-skinned people, very dark-skinned people. And we still consider [ourselves] as one group. We don't consider [ourselves] as black or white or anything, just Bukharian."

While they generally do not use the term themselves, some interviewees expressed no objection to it being assigned to them.

JEWISH DENOMINATIONS

Like many Sephardic and Mizrahi American Jews, Bukharian Jews generally do not use denominational

We don't consider [ourselves] as black or white or anything, just Bukharian.

frameworks, and community members with varying levels of observance will sit together at the same prayer services. Some interviewees described their traditions as being "Orthodox" with respect to gender norms and rituals, with male-only clergy and separate seating for men and women in synagogues. Many of the interviewees describe an ongoing "rightward" religious shift in the community as members learn more about the minutiae of Jewish observance and become influenced by Orthodox Jews in nearby Ashkenazi communities. People in this category increasingly send their children to Jewish day schools that were established by and for Orthodox Ashkenazim. The abundance of kiruv (outreach) organizations and Orthodox rabbinical leaders operating within and around the Bukharian community have contributed to this religious shift, and have created familial and communal rifts between older, more traditional Bukharians, and younger generations increasingly adopting the markers of Ashkenazi Orthodoxy.

SECTION 3.

Community

MAJOR COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Religious institutions are the major organizations in the Bukharian community. The Bukharian Jewish Community Center (BJCC) was built in Forest Hills to serve as a central hub for the Bukharian community. Its five floors currently house a synagogue, meeting spaces for local community leaders, a social hall, and the offices of the community *beit din* [Heb: Jewish rabbinical court] and the *Bukharian Times*, a Russian-language newspaper published by and for the Bukharian community. The BJCC also houses the local branch of the Bukharan Jewish Congress, an international organization that unites Bukharian communities throughout the world.

Beth Gavriel Bukharian Congregation is probably the most prominent synagogue in the community, featuring daily prayer services, Torah classes, a *mikveh* [Heb: ritual bath], and an associated day school. Other schools include The Jewish Institute of Queens, a Bukharian-run Jewish day school originally founded to acculturate immigrants to religious Jewish life in America, and Shaarei Tzion, a Bukharian K-8 school that serves families who want a more religiously observant environment. Many other synagogues and day schools serve the community.

In addition to synagogues and day schools, other community institutions include kiruv (outreach) organizations that seek to provide religious education to community members. Chazaq, an organization started by and for Bukharians, provides educational and cultural programming to Jewish families beyond the Bukharian community. Multiple Bukharian-run food pantries are open to anyone in need. Yesodot, founded by members of the community, provides outpatient counseling and other mental health services to community members who might otherwise not seek help from communal outsiders. At the community's social core is a robust system of kosher restaurants and social halls designed to support the frequency, size, and scope of Bukharian celebrations and memorials. Lastly, Bukharian newspapers, magazines, and online networking groups provide community members with shared stories and opportunities for connection.

> **When one falls, everyone helps. No one is left behind. You will never see a Bukharian homeless guy.**

MORAL FRAMEWORKS

Family

The most common descriptors interviewees provided about their community were "tight-knit" and "family-oriented," and much of community members' interactions and worldview are through the lens of family, with deep attachments to close relatives, as well as an affinity to the Bukharian community more broadly. Bukharian Jews in Queens see themselves a part of a sprawling international extended family, with connections to Bukharians in other parts of the United States, Canada, Israel, Austria, and beyond.

It was common for new Bukharian immigrants to live in apartments and/or houses near other family members, often in multi-generational homes. For many in the community today, living in close proximity to immediate family is still both an expectation and a priority. Family members are intimately involved in one another's lives and one another's spaces across life stages. It is customary for children to remain in their parents' homes until marriage in their early to mid 20s. Caregiving for elderly parents is an expected way of demonstrating honor and gratitude; refusing to take in one's elderly parents can be seen as a shameful sign of disrespect.

Community members see one another as family members to support and protect. Elisheva, a 46-year-old immigrant, said,

> *"What I like about the community, if somebody has a funeral, everybody would come support you. Somebody has a wedding, everybody would come support you…Everybody comes to each other's aid in the moment of need."*

Manny explained,

> *"We are very, very tight-knit. When one falls, everyone helps. No one is left behind. You will never see a Bukharian homeless guy….It's like a big herd. And if one of them falls behind, the whole herd will surround him and pick him up so the wolves won't get him."*

Another interviewee, 42-year-old Bobby, acknowledged that outsiders might not understand this fierce need to protect one another:

> *"If you bother one of us, you're bothering all of us. And to an American, he would feel like, oh, they're a gang…No, they're defending [each other]…"*

An additional element of family life is the interdependent reputations of family members, with everyone in a family serving as a representative for their immediate and extended family members as well. Members of a "good family," for example, are desirable marriage prospects, whereas one "bad egg" can "taint" the family's other members. A 53-year-old community rabbi saw this as a positive mechanism for ensuring community members behave in accordance with communal norms:

> *"One of the things I tell for myself personally, the more people that know me, I feel safe, 'cause I'm afraid to do something wrong. People will say, Oh, my God. What is that rabbi doing?…You understand that that's the whole idea…It keeps you in check…You want that."*

Hospitality and hosting also lie at the heart of a "good family." Bukharians take great pride in their homes, and invest time and money into furnishings and finishes to create the best possible experience for their guests.

Gender expectations

According to most of the interviewees, the Bukharian community has long adhered to traditional gender roles, as is typical of many groups from the Muslim world. Men have been expected to provide for the family and function as the head of the household to whom all decisions are deferred. Women have been expected to remain "pure" until marriage, at which point they dedicate themselves to their families and households, in addition to other responsibilities they may have, professional or otherwise.

In the years following the immigration of many Bukharian families to the United States, Bukharian women who sought higher education and professions were still expected to carry out their traditional responsibilities as homemakers. In many households, boys and

> **I think that the country's woke-ism is poisonous…It's just gonna bring everything down.**

girls are still raised according to these expectations. Yet many younger Bukharians, particularly women, increasingly expect that husbands will take on a share of the housework, which can present competing viewpoints about how future Bukharian families should function.

Zionism and politics

The Bukharian community is deeply Zionist. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, huge swaths of Central Asian Jews made their way to Israel, where an earlier wave of Bukharian immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries had already established a Bukharian-Israeli community. Jerusalem's Bukharan Quarter was built in 1890. In the United States, most members of the Bukharian community have close ties to relatives in Israel and feel interpersonally connected to and responsible for them. In the wake of October 7, 2023, many interviewees said, the community came together to fundraise and advocate for Israel, one issue on which most Bukharians find common ground.

With some exceptions, mostly among younger Bukharians born in the US, the community is very conservative politically. Some interviewees trace this to the community's experience in the Soviet Union.

> *"Your parents come here and they're being told that where we came from is completely wrong. It's communist,"*

said Yvanna, a 40-year-old immigrant who considers herself more politically progressive than most of her relatives.

> *"And so we have to do everything we can…to prove that we're not communist, we're the opposite."*

The community has become increasingly Republican in recent years, particularly with the rise of Trumpian populism and the fear of woke leftism. Many community members, however, do not vote in local elections, and a significant number refuse to register to vote altogether so they can avoid jury duty.

Although the interviewees did not explicitly discuss DEI by name, social and political attitudes among the interviewees reveal their attitudes toward this topic. In recent years, an increasing number of Bukharian parents have been taking their children out of the local public schools and enrolling them in yeshivot, not only due to religious and cultural motivations but also out of concern that New York City public schools are promoting a "woke agenda." Steeped in traditional gender roles, community members as a whole reject policies around gender identity and gender fluidity. Said Shira, an American-born 36-year-old,

> *"I think that the country's woke-ism is poisonous… It's just gonna bring everything down."*

BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

Because of the relatively small size of this community compared to other Sephardic communities, especially within the American Jewish community as a whole, and due to a general lack of awareness of the geopolitics of Central Asia, most Americans have little to no understanding of who Bukharians are. Most of the interviewees for this study, while very proud of their Bukharian heritage, are reluctant to describe it to most outsiders.

When asked to describe what makes someone a member of the Bukharian community, most interviewees gave geographic and/or historical descriptions: Bukharians are Jews who originated in Central Asia, speak Russian, and kept their Judaism. Many of the interviewees also relied on what seems like tautological logic. Bukharian "insiders" are those who participate in community events, keep Bukharian traditions, and behave according to Bukharian values. In other words, what makes someone a member of this community is that one acts like a member, and one who acts like a member of the community is accepted as a member. Even for interviewees who married outside of the community and/or purposefully moved away, doing "Bukharian things" makes them "feel Bukharian." Said said 32-year-old Penny, who whose husband is Ashkenazi,

> *"I'm a little bit inside [the Bukharian community], just a little bit…I'm part of the family by going to family functions…All the traditions, weddings, and bar mitzvahs…I feel like that's where my 'Bukharian' shows."*

Interviewees who at times have felt like outsiders attributed their experiences to behaviors that were deemed "un-Bukharian": Molly, a 26-year-old born in America, said friends from high school told her,

> *"'Oh, you were never really part of our Bukharian group.' Why? Because I did after-school activities…and I wanted to sit in the lunch room [with the non-Bukharian kids]…"*

“

I feel like the financial status is what’s making it more difficult to stay within the community…I sometimes don’t fit in because everybody is throwing all of these weddings and parties … and I’m like, here I am and I can’t even throw a normal birthday party.

For Molly’s Bukharian friends, being part of the Bukharian group meant socializing exclusively with other Bukharians and not participating in activities outside the scope of what Bukharians are “supposed to do.” In extreme cases, behaviors considered too unacceptable within the community can irrevocably brand individuals and/or their families as outsiders. Dating and marrying non-Jews presents a hard boundary that will exclude Bukharians from family and communal life.

Other behaviors can also lead to social barriers and exclusion. For a subset of community members who have become more religiously observant, having children who have religiously “regressed” can cause communal shame. Lena, a 43-year-old educator, said:

> *“When we become religious and one of our kids goes backward, it’s crazy in the community…It’s an embarrassment… people ask us, ‘How could you let this? It’s the parents’ fault. How can you allow this?’”*

An interviewee who works with community members suffering from opioid addiction said,

> *“If there’s an addict in the family, then it’s a bad family automatically, they’re bad parents, bad siblings, people shouldn’t marry the siblings of the addict.”*

One interviewee who identifies as politically progressive has learned to keep his political opinions to himself or risk alienating huge swaths of his close and extended family.

COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Cost of living

Older community members express concern about New York City’s skyrocketing housing prices, as Bukharian families find it increasingly difficult to buy homes clustered together in Queens. Given the freedom of mobility offered to Jews in the United States, geographic closeness becomes an even more potent mechanism for communal sustainability, and distance can put this communal sustainability at risk.

Aside from housing prices, the cost of living in the community can be challenging for many of its members. In keeping with cultural emphases on hospitality and bringing family together, many Bukharians recognize major milestones such as gender reveals, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and weddings with elaborate parties for extended family and friends. In lieu of buying the host a gift, guests are expected to share in the cost of the party itself and to reciprocate by throwing elaborate parties of their own or risk being socially excluded. Deena, a 40-year-old teacher, said,

> *“I feel like the financial status is what’s making it more difficult to stay within the community…Even myself, I sometimes don’t fit in because everybody is throwing all of these weddings and parties and events and it’s costing them thousands of dollars, and I’m like, here I am and I can’t even throw a normal birthday party.”*

Mental health, abuse, and addiction

Because Bukharian families often face immense pressure to preserve their reputation as a “good family,” they tend to keep potentially stigmatizing family matters, such as mental health disorders, marital issues, or addiction, private. Seeking professional help

or guidance is tantamount to broadcasting that the family has a problem. To paraphrase 27-year-old David, a Bukharian home in trouble is like a house on fire: Everyone in the community can see that the house is on fire, but rather than throwing water onto the flames, the neighbors distance themselves from the home so they won't breathe in smoke from standing too close. Some interviewees shared personal and second-hand accounts of domestic abuse that were never discussed inside or outside of the home and were therefore never addressed. Mental health professionals and social workers in the community are working to normalize therapy and other treatment options.

A number of interviewees said the focus on a family's reputation can have negative effects, including a tendency to "sweep things under the rug." As Violet, a 26-year-old woman who left the community, explained,

> *"If any situation happens internally, inside the house, you don't talk about it outside, you pretend like everything is fine, you smile, you say you have the best family ever. You don't go to other people about your problems…This is not something you share with a psychologist. This is our family thing and we'll resolve it within the family. But nothing actually gets resolved, it just gets swept away under the rug."*

Continuity and change

As the immigrant generation ages and the Bukharian community becomes more Americanized, some of the older interviewees fear the erosion of "traditional" Bukharian family values that shaped their lives in Central Asia. Pinchas said nostalgically that as family units become more diffuse and modern, the community is losing its links to the wisdom of earlier generations:

> *"Here in America, it's different. You have to marry, you have to get an apartment. And mama, papa don't involve yourself in our family, don't tell us what to do….We don't have grandparents living in the same houses with children. So there is a breaking line there. The family breaks. The structure of the family is different."*

For some community members, religiosity is a bulwark against losing Bukharian identity. Boaz, a 64-year-old immigrant, explained that in Central Asia, Bukharians were automatically distinct from the surrounding Muslim communities, but in the American context, the community needs to differentiate itself from its secular environment by developing a religious lifestyle that incorporates religious stringencies common among American Orthodox Jews but rarely practiced in the Soviet Union. Other community members, though, like 33-year-old Benny, view the community's slide to the religious right less positively:

> *"Unfortunately, in America, I think they're using religion and trying to get closer to religion as… a safe space for them to not lose their identity as Bukharians. But I feel like we're becoming way too more religious at an alarming rate and less open to new ideas and to change and to different things here in America."*

RELIGIOSITY HAS BECOME BOTH A SHIELD AND A SIGNAL

As traditional family structures shift in the American context, some Bukharians embrace stricter religious observance to preserve communal identity—though others worry it's closing the community off to change

SECTION 4.

Interactions

ASHKENAZI INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

Following their arrival in the United States, Bukharian immigrants relied on existing Jewish organizations developed by Ashkenazi communities—for example, the UJA Federation of New York, New York Association for New Americans (NYANA), and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)—for housing, furniture, and other forms of financial assistance. Interviewees recall a mixed set of responses to this support. Many interviewees expressed immense gratitude for the assistance of the American Jewish community, yet they simultaneously recalled condescension, particularly among the New York Orthodox community. One 63-year-old community rabbi described how Bukharians learned to navigate the more complex religious minutiae that much of the Ashkenazi Orthodox community accepts as a matter of course:

> *"We were introduced to 17 kinds of kosher…We used to go to the butcher and used to say, this meat is kosher and this meat is not kosher. It was very simple. Over here you come and there is three or four supervisions, and each one says what is good and what is not good…This was messed up for us."*

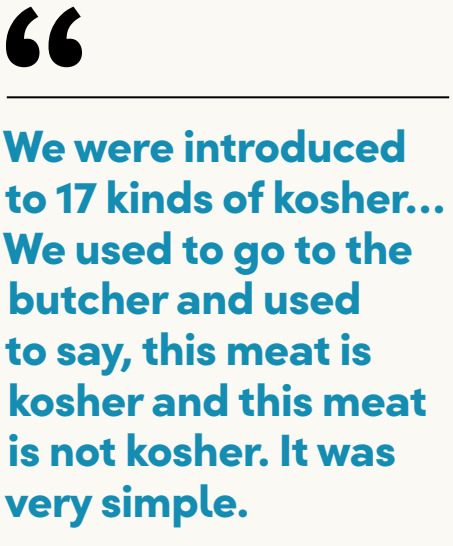
Traditional Bukharians who had been proud of their religious lifestyle in Central Asia were made to feel that they were not knowledgeable Jews. In recent years, some community members have turned to Chabad to help them retain and further develop their religious identities.

As the Bukharian community has established more synagogues, schools, restaurants, and mikvehs, they have become less reliant on Ashkenazi institutions. Nonetheless, many religiously observant Bukharian parents opt to send their children to Ashkenazi-run schools. As a 36-year-old mother of four young children put it,

> *"We trust the Ashkenazim more with the education process…They've been around longer and they know what they're doing…The Sephardic schools are newer. I'm not experimenting on my kid. Let them experiment…My grandkids can go there if it becomes a good school."*

OTHER SEPHARDIC/MIZRAHI COMMUNITIES

Most of the interviewees bristled at the idea of making comparisons between different Sephardic communities, preferring to think of everyone as Jews. Some younger interviewees expressed affinity for other Sephardic communities, especially those that originated in traditional Muslim cultures. However, a few interviewees described what they view as other Sephardim holding Bukharians in low esteem. One 32-year-old woman, who eventually married an Ashkenazi man, described dates she went on with non-Bukharian Sephardim:



In Russia, we were called Jews, not lovingly, with hatred. When I came to this country, they called me Russian. I said, I resent that. I'm a Jew from Russia.

"I dodged a bullet because their Sephardic [community] was not very accepting of Bukharians…There's a general feeling of other Sephardis that they could be more superior to other Sephardis…some people think they're better than others."

NON-JEWS FROM CENTRAL ASIA

Interviewees who came of age in the Soviet Union and emigrated as adults described mostly congenial relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors in Central Asia:

"We had to find ways to coexist with Muslim people… There were many ethnic groups that lived in Central Asia…We had to learn to be with them. We learned their languages, their culture."

In New York, older Bukharians feel a cultural affinity with Uzbek and Tajik immigrants in Queens, many of whom immigrated to the United States alongside their Bukharian Jewish neighbors. According to one community rabbi,

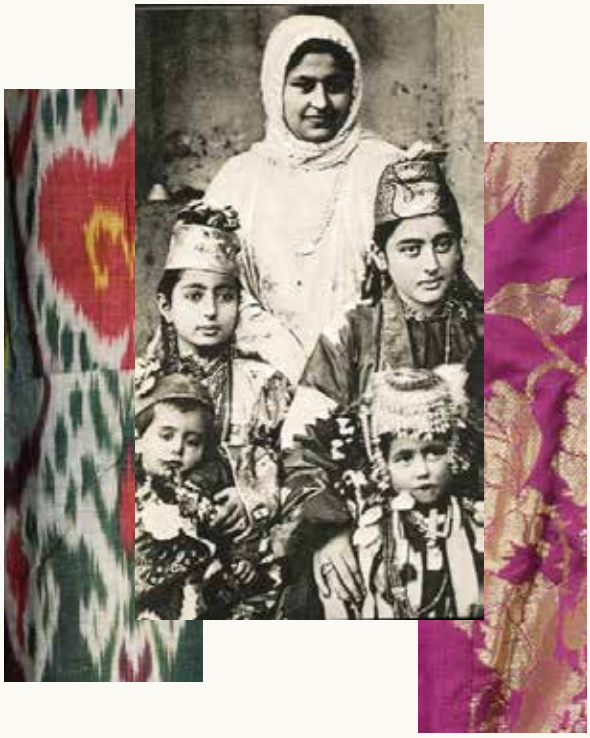
"A lot of the Muslims coming now to New York, they come into the Jewish neighborhood…They're running their weddings in our glatt kosher halls because they feel close, the culture and everything, and because they eat kosher meat too, the halal meat…We respect that we are not religious the same, but it doesn't mean that we cannot be friends."

NON-JEWISH SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS

Because Bukharian history and identity do not neatly align with American society's racial and ethnic categories, Bukharians have had to reconceptualize themselves after immigrating from Central Asia. An interviewee in his 60s recalled the jarring interaction he had with non-Jews upon his arrival to New York:

"In Russia, we were called Jews, not lovingly, with hatred. When I came to this country, they called me Russian. I said, I resent that. I'm a Jew from Russia. They didn't get it. You're Russian or you're American."[2]

Since most Americans are unfamiliar with the Bukharian community, the interviewees report experiencing very little anti-Bukharian discrimination from non-Jews. Although many are concerned about the uptick in American antisemitism in general, Bukharians experience antisemitism as members of the broader American Jewish community rather than specifically as part of the Bukharian community.



SECTION 5.

Distinctions

What is distinctive about this community compared to the other three?

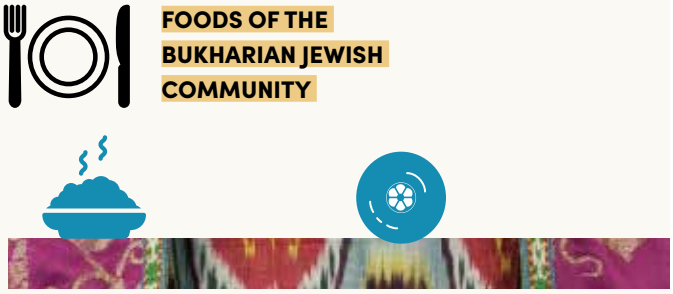
The Bukharian community is distinct in its reliance on frequent gatherings of extended family and friends as a means of holding the community together. The community's unique sociopolitical and linguistic history also distinguishes it from the other communities described in this report.

A distinct Jewish identity in Central Asia

Unlike other Sephardic and Mizrahi groups who strongly identify with their countries of origin (such as Syria, Iran, or Morocco), Bukharian Jews do not identify as Uzbeki or Tajiki. In Central Asia, national identity is often tied to Muslim religious identity, making these labels incompatible with Jewish identity. Instead, for Bukharian Jews, being Bukharian inherently means being Jewish—the term itself carries both ethnic and religious meaning. This distinguishes them from other Jewish communities that align more closely with the broader national identities of their home countries.

Between Russian and Bukharian identity in the US

Though Bukharian Jews speak Russian, they do not consider themselves ethnically or culturally Russian. In their Soviet-era homelands, "Russian" referred to non-Jewish Europeans, and "Russian Jews" typically described Ashkenazi Jews from European parts of the USSR. However, upon arriving in the US, many Bukharian Jews were mistakenly labeled as Russian, even by well-meaning American Jews and non-Jews. While some accept this identifier for the sake of simplicity, others find it misleading. Despite these distinctions, Bukharian and Russian Jews share cultural and linguistic connections, which create bonds between the communities, even as their religious traditions remain quite different.



FOODS OF THE BUKHARIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

Bakhsh/baxsh:

This green dish of rice, meat, and herbs is exclusive to the Bukharian community. This traditional food is often served on Shabbat.

Lepyoshka/Bukharian non:

This Bukharian take on a classic Uzbek flatbread was originally cooked along the sides of a tandoor. Many Bukharians use this bread to make the hamotzi blessing at the Shabbat table.

Chalpak:

These softs sheets of fried dough are a staple of yushvos, large annual gatherings to commemorate the passing of a loved one.

Parties as communal continuity and cohesion mechanisms

Bukharian Jews in the United States have developed a distinctive communal infrastructure centered around restaurants, wedding halls, and event spaces, which function as both social hubs and mechanisms for communal continuity. These spaces serve as gathering points where Bukharian traditions, food, and music reinforce cultural identity. Memorial gatherings known as yushvos are held annually for deceased relatives, often spanning multiple generations, with family members convening at community restaurants to commemorate their loved ones. Celebrations—particularly weddings and milestone events—are an essential component of Bukharian communal life, with significant investment in physical infrastructure to accommodate their frequency and scale. These gatherings operate within an established financial system, where guests contribute monetary gifts in envelopes rather than bringing physical gifts. As these celebrations have become increasingly elaborate and expensive, the financial burden of participation has grown, with some community members feeling social pressure to contribute even when it is unsustainable. Despite these tensions, the expectation of participation in both communal events and financial reciprocity remains a defining feature of Bukharian social life.

Customs

Kosh-Chinon: This ceremony is held a few days before a wedding, in which a bride's eyebrows and facial hair are plucked for the first time. The mirror she uses to view her "clean" face is kept as a memento. Although in the United States women do not typically wait until marriage to remove their facial hair, they may still hold the ceremony nevertheless.

Festive Wedding Attire and Ceremonies: Many young couples will wear a jomah, a colorful ceremonial robe, at their wedding to signal the close of the festivities. The couple and their immediate family wear these colorful robes while dancing to traditional Bukharian music.

POPULAR WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS

Boshet Salomat:
"Bless you" / "To your health"

Hudo Beshkur:
"Thank God"

Hudo Hat:
"God willing"

KOSH-CHINON: A PRE-WEDDING RITE

In this traditional Bukharian ceremony, a bride's eyebrows and facial hair are plucked for the first time just days before her wedding. The mirror she uses is saved as a keepsake. While American Bukharian women often remove facial hair earlier in life, many still honor the ritual as a cultural gesture.

NOTES

1 This calculation is based on 95% confidence intervals for this population provided by UJA-Federation of New York to this study's researchers.

2 The previous paragraph highlighted amicable relationships between Jews and Muslims, while this one describes an interviewee's feeling of being "hated." Though this might seem contradictory, it reflects the complexity of our interviewees' memories and how dynamic and multi-faceted these relationships were. Some of this contrast stems from the diversity of attitudes toward Jews among Soviet authorities and neighboring Muslim communities, and the contexts of each of the Central Asian cities from which they emigrated. Some of the complexity also reflects a shift over time, from historic co-existence to escalating ethnic tensions in the years leading up to and following the collapse of the USSR.